

From Mischief to Heroism: A Transcultural Reappraisal of Tom Sawyer in Western and Asian Children's Narratives

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Abstract—This article re-examines Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* through a transcultural lens. It focuses on the dual characterization of its protagonist as both mischievous and heroic. While Tom's truancy, trickery, and playful defiance initially cast him as a rebellious figure, his moral growth and courage reposition him as a prototype for later child heroes. Using qualitative close reading and drawing on classical and contemporary theories of characterization, the study situates Tom Sawyer within a broader archetype of mischievous child figures across cultures. Western texts such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson*, and Roald Dahl's *Matilda* demonstrate how youthful rebellion can be reframed as empathy, resilience, and civic responsibility. Vietnamese narratives of Trạng Quỳnh (Scholar Quynh) and Trạng Tí (Scholar Ti) valorize mischief as social critique and communal pride, while Chinese myths of 哪吒 (Nezha) and 红孩儿 (Red Boy) transform unruly defiance into cosmic justice and spiritual devotion. Findings suggest that the "mischief-to-heroism" paradigm constitutes a transcultural archetype that negotiates between entertainment and moral formation. By bridging nineteenth-century American fiction with Asian traditions, the study highlights children's literature as a global medium through which rebellion is narratively reshaped into justice, responsibility, and identity.

Index Terms—characterization, mischief, heroism, transcultural archetype, Vietnamese and Chinese mythology

I. INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (2010) occupies a pivotal place in the canon of children's literature. While often read as a nostalgic portrayal of nineteenth-century American boyhood, the novel presents a protagonist whose identity oscillates between playful mischief and heroic responsibility. Tom's antics, skipping school, tricking his peers, and resisting authority, are counterbalanced by moments of courage and moral growth, most notably during the rescue of Becky Thatcher and the confrontation with Injun Joe. This paradox has long animated debates about how children's texts negotiate the boundary between entertainment and moral instruction (Bertrand, 2022). Recent scholarship emphasizes

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that children's literature is not a static genre but a dynamic cultural field that reflects shifting social and ethical concerns (Nelson et al., 2024). Recent scholarship also highlights how contemporary children's literature increasingly foregrounds themes of gender equality and social justice" (Al-Matrafi, 2023). Contemporary works such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* novels illustrate how mischievous traits can be reframed as pathways to empathy, resilience, and civic responsibility. Studies further demonstrate that such narratives support not only enjoyment but also processes of identity formation, social learning, and intercultural understanding (Gasser et al., 2022; Kuzmičová et al., 2022). In this context, Tom Sawyer's transformation from trickster to reluctant hero resonates with the pedagogical expectations of twenty-first-century children's literature.

Nevertheless, much of the existing scholarship situates Tom Sawyer primarily within the Anglo-American tradition, leaving underexplored its affinities with non-Western literary and folkloric models. While theories of characterization and archetype have provided valuable insights (Murphy, 1972; Abrams & Harpham, 2009; Rodak & Storey, 2022), few studies have examined how Tom's mischievous-to-heroic trajectory aligns with global counterparts. Vietnamese folk narratives such as Scholar Quynh and the modern comic series *The Vietnamese Child Prodigy Comics* (Scholar Ti) reimagine mischief as a form of social critique and communal pride, while Chinese mythology offers figures such as Nezha and Red Boy, whose youthful rebellion is rechanneled into cosmic justice or spiritual devotion. Together, these traditions suggest that Tom Sawyer can be fruitfully re-examined not only as an American icon but also as part of a broader transcultural archetype. This gap motivates the present study, which seeks to extend the scope of analysis beyond national or regional boundaries. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* negotiate the tension between mischief and heroism in its portrayal of childhood?
2. In what ways do Vietnamese and Chinese children's narratives embody similar or divergent patterns of transformation from mischief to heroism?
3. What insights emerge when Tom Sawyer is situated within a transcultural continuum of mischievous child figures?

Previous scholarship has predominantly focused on Anglo-American contexts, leaving little room for comparative perspectives that engage with Asian narrative traditions. This paper draws on both Western and Asian children's narratives to explore how mischief is narratively transformed into heroism across cultures. In doing so, it situates Twain's *Tom Sawyer* within a transcultural dialogue and establishes the groundwork for a broader theoretical inquiry into the archetype of the mischievous child.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theories of Characterization

The study of characterization has long been central to literary analysis, as it provides insight into how narratives construct figures and how readers attribute traits to them. Murphy (1972) proposed one of the most practical models, identifying nine methods through which an author reveals a character, including physical description, speech, actions, thoughts, and others' perspectives. This framework, although originally pedagogical, remains useful for tracing the consistency or transformation of characters in fiction. Similarly, Pickering and Hoepfer (1982) emphasize that characters cannot be studied in isolation, since their traits are shaped by the interplay of plot, setting, and theme. Their distinction between telling (direct authorial statements) and showing (indirect revelation through behavior and dialogue) continues to guide narrative analysis, particularly in children's literature where implicit characterization often plays a pedagogical role (Jannidis, 2013; Pickering & Hoepfer, 1982; Ribó, 2019).

Abrams and Harpham (2011) consolidate these conceptual tools by providing a shared critical vocabulary, such as "flat" versus "round" and "static" versus "dynamic" characters, which enables comparative literary study across periods and genres. More recently, narratologists like Jahn (2005), Jannidis (2013) and Rodak and Storey (2022) have expanded the discussion by situating characterization within broader narrative structures, especially focalization and discourse strategies. Meanwhile, semiotic perspectives highlight how characterization emerges from patterns of linguistic and cultural signs, extending earlier structuralist insights into contemporary debates (Ribó, 2019; Rodak & Storey, 2022).

All in all, these theories provide a comprehensive analytical framework: Murphy's taxonomy allows for micro-level identification of character cues, Pickering and Hoepfer's approach situates characters within the narrative system, Abrams and Harpham offer a stable terminology for comparative study, while contemporary narratology and semiotics reveal how these strategies operate within discourse and reader response. This integrative view is particularly relevant to rethinking Tom Sawyer's characterization, as it enables an analysis that bridges nineteenth-century narrative conventions and contemporary children's literature.

B. Characterization in Children's Literature

Characterization is a central element in children's literature because young readers often build their engagement with texts through the personalities, behaviors, and moral choices of fictional figures. Scholars widely recognize that well-developed characters in children's books can nurture empathy, imagination, and critical thinking among readers (Nikolajeva, 2014). The process of characterization in this genre does not merely serve narrative functions but also contributes to children's personal and social development by presenting models of values, relationships, and identity.

Research indicates that children respond most strongly to characters who embody clear moral traits and exhibit agency in problem-solving. Bayraktar (2021) found that children's favorite storybooks frequently featured protagonists who were adventurous, good-hearted, or humorous, demonstrating the importance of character attributes in shaping literary preferences. Similarly, Galda and Cullinan (2010) emphasized that characters in children's texts provide both mirrors and windows: mirrors reflecting children's own lives and values, and windows that introduce them to different perspectives, cultures, and experiences.

Characterization in children's literature often intersects with issues of representation and diversity. Studies show that stereotypical portrayals of gender roles or occupations can limit children's perceptions of identity and social participation (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Conversely, inclusive and multidimensional characters foster awareness of diversity and social justice, reinforcing the transformative potential of children's literature (Koss, 2015). Davenport's (2024) case study underscores the importance of bias awareness in early childhood education contexts. These findings suggest that characterization is not only an aesthetic choice by authors but also a pedagogical strategy with long-term implications.

Furthermore, the narrative techniques used to construct characters, such as dialogue, actions, internal thoughts, and interactions with other figures, help children internalize moral reasoning and emotional literacy (Nikolajeva, 2014). Through such literary devices, young readers learn to evaluate characters' motivations and consequences of actions, ultimately contributing to the formation of their own ethical frameworks.

In short, characterization in children's literature serves a dual purpose: engaging readers through compelling fictional figures and cultivating broader educational and social outcomes. By examining the ways authors depict characters, scholars and educators can better understand how literature shapes children's cognitive, emotional, and moral development.

C. Characterization in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) remains one of the most enduring works in American children's literature, not only for its humor and adventure but also for its complex approach to characterization. Twain constructs Tom Sawyer as a multifaceted figure, playful, mischievous, but ultimately capable of growth and moral responsibility. Scholars often argue that Twain's narrative techniques reveal the contradictions of childhood in nineteenth-century America: innocence combined with rebellion, imagination alongside conformity (Camfield, 2003).

A key feature of Twain's characterization lies in his use of dialogue and action. Tom's speech, filled with wit and exaggeration, positions him as both a trickster and a social commentator. Episodes such as the fence-painting scene exemplify how Tom manipulates social dynamics to his advantage, illustrating a child's agency within the constraints of adult authority (Messent, 2020). These episodes also highlight Twain's mastery of "showing" rather than "telling," allowing Tom's personality to emerge through performance rather than authorial exposition.

Moreover, Twain situates Tom within a web of contrasting characters, Huckleberry Finn, Becky Thatcher, Aunt Polly, whose interactions reveal his adaptability and evolving sense of self. Huck's carefree independence contrasts with Tom's desire for adventure within social boundaries, while Becky represents both romantic idealism and the moral expectations of childhood. Through these relationships, Twain emphasizes the developmental journey from self-interest toward responsibility, portraying Tom as a liminal figure between childhood and adulthood (Messent, 1998).

Contemporary scholarship has re-evaluated Tom Sawyer not only as a comic hero but also as a cultural symbol. Tom embodies nineteenth-century American ideals of boyhood, freedom, cleverness, and resilience, yet his characterization also resonates with modern discussions of agency, identity, and youth values (Sloane, 1980). Considered in this context, Twain's novel bridges historical and present understandings of childhood, allowing Tom Sawyer to be read as both a product of his time and a timeless literary figure.

In sum, the characterization of Tom Sawyer exemplifies Twain's narrative artistry: a blend of humor, realism, and moral inquiry. By constructing Tom as mischievous yet ultimately heroic, Twain set a precedent for later children's literature in which protagonists embody both flaws and virtues, inviting readers to reflect on their own growth and ethical choices.

D. Research Gap

While theories of characterization provide rich analytical tools (Abrams & Harpham, 2011; Cuddon, 2013; Murphy, 1972; Pickering & Hooper, 1982; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002), their application to children's literature has been somewhat fragmented. Scholarship on children's narratives often emphasizes moral and cultural functions (Hunt, 2005), yet there is little integration between these approaches and the more formalist frameworks of literary studies.

Regarding Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, critical discussions largely focus on its humor, realism, and place in American literary tradition (Robinson, 1995). Although Tom Sawyer has been examined as an icon of American boyhood, his progression from mischievous prankster to heroic figure remains underexplored when viewed in light of contemporary theories of children's literature and evolving youth values.

This gap suggests the need for a re-examination of Tom Sawyer's characterization that synthesizes classical literary theory with perspectives from children's literature studies. By doing so, the present study contributes to ongoing debates on how literary characters reflect cultural understandings of childhood. The guiding research questions, already outlined in the introduction, provide the framework for addressing this gap.

III. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS SELECTION

This study employs a comparative close reading methodology, grounded in narratological, semiotic, and reader-response frameworks. The close reading approach allows for a micro-level analysis of textual cues, such as dialogue, action, focalization, and symbolism, that construct child protagonists as both mischievous and heroic. The comparative dimension highlights the ways in which these archetypes resonate across cultural traditions while revealing significant divergences. Such a methodology reflects current directions in children's literature scholarship that emphasize the integration of formalist analysis with socio-cultural perspectives (Nikolajeva, 2014; Nelson et al., 2024).

The corpus was deliberately selected to balance Western canonical works with Asian folkloric and mythological narratives. Three criteria guided the selection process. First, each text possesses cultural and literary impact, either through its influence on national traditions or on the global canon of children's literature, as in the case of Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Second, the texts represent canonical or folkloric status, ensuring that the analysis addresses works with enduring cultural authority, such as *Scholar Quynh* tales or the myth of *Nezha*. Third, all texts clearly illustrate the mischief-to-heroism trajectory, where youthful rebellion is transformed into moral courage, social critique, or spiritual devotion.

Based on these criteria, the study examines a transcultural corpus that includes *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain, 2010), *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997–2007), *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (Riordan, 2005–2009), and *Matilda* (Dahl, 1988) as exemplars of the Western tradition. To bring in Southeast Asian perspectives, Vietnamese folk narratives of *Scholar Quynh* (Nguyen, 2001) and the modern comic series *The Vietnamese Child Prodigy Comics* featuring *Scholar Ti* (Dao & Le, 2002) are analyzed. The comparative scope is further extended through Chinese mythology with the figure of *Nezha* from *Fengshen Yanyi* and *Red Boy* from *Journey to the West*.

The combination of canonical, folkloric, and mythological texts allows the study to situate Tom Sawyer within a broader transcultural archetype of mischievous child protagonists. This comparative framework directly supports the guiding research questions: (1) how mischief and heroism are negotiated in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; (2) how Vietnamese and Chinese narratives embody similar or divergent patterns; and (3) what interpretive insights emerge when these traditions are placed into dialogue.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

A. *Tom Sawyer the Mischievous Boy*

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* opens with episodes that firmly establish Tom as a figure of mischief and rebellion. His truancy, playful deception, and disregard for adult authority reflect the archetype of the unruly child. The iconic "whitewashing the fence" scene exemplifies this spirit: Tom, initially punished with hard labor, subverts the situation by convincing his peers to complete the task for him, even exchanging their prized possessions for the privilege of painting (Twain, 2010). Through irony and humor, Twain transforms Tom's mischievous disobedience into an act of creative agency, illustrating how children's cunning can invert adult systems of control.

From the perspective of literary characterization, Tom's antics reveal the subtle interplay of direct and indirect methods. Twain seldom defines Tom's personality explicitly; instead, he constructs it through Tom's actions, dialogue, and the responses of others. Murphy's (1972) framework emphasizes that such indirect characterization invites readers to infer traits through behavior and speech, while Pickering and Hooper (1982) note the role of irony in shaping reader perceptions. Tom's tricks, whether feigning illness to skip school or orchestrating playful pranks, become a narrative device that balances satire with affection, allowing Twain to critique adult hypocrisy while preserving Tom's appeal.

Scholars of children's literature suggest that mischievousness is not merely comic relief but a narrative strategy to represent childhood as a liminal state between innocence and autonomy (Nikolajeva, 2014). Viewed from this perspective, Tom embodies what Grenby (2008) describes as the "ambivalent child," simultaneously celebrated for playfulness and censured for disorder. His disobedience, rather than undermining his moral development, becomes the foundation for growth, resonating with contemporary understandings of child protagonists as complex figures negotiating authority and independence. Thus, Tom's mischief is not only a marker of youthful rebellion but also a literary mechanism that sets the stage for his eventual transformation into a heroic figure.

B. *Tom Sawyer the Heroic Boy*

While Tom Sawyer is initially portrayed as mischievous and rebellious, his narrative arc gradually foregrounds qualities of bravery, loyalty, and moral responsibility. Twain juxtaposes Tom's playful pranks with transformative episodes that test his courage and ethical maturity. A central example is Tom's decision to testify in court to save Muff Potter, a socially marginalized character falsely accused of murder. This act, which places Tom at great personal risk, highlights his emerging sense of justice and moral accountability (Twain, 2010). Literary scholars often interpret this moment as a turning point where Tom transcends childhood mischief to embody heroic responsibility (Messent, 2020).

Another key episode is Tom's role in protecting Becky Thatcher during their entrapment in McDougal's Cave. His ability to remain resourceful and calm under extreme pressure contrasts sharply with his earlier frivolous behavior, signaling a significant step in his bildungsroman-like progression (Blair, 2021). The cave, as many critics note, operates symbolically as a rite-of-passage space, testing Tom's endurance and reaffirming his capacity for leadership (Robinson,

1995). Moreover, the discovery of treasure at the novel's conclusion is often read as a metaphorical reward for Tom's growth from trickster to responsible young hero (Camfield, 2003).

In literary terms, Twain relies on devices such as symbolism and metaphor to frame Tom's heroism. The courtroom symbolizes the social sphere where justice must prevail, while the cave represents both danger and the possibility of transformation. Such devices elevate Tom's actions from mere plot points to emblematic markers of moral development (Grenby, 2008). These heroic qualities, though situated in nineteenth-century America, anticipate later trends in children's literature, where youthful protagonists are often depicted as agents of justice, empathy, and resilience (Nelson et al., 2024). Thus, Tom Sawyer exemplifies a hybrid character whose heroism grows organically out of his mischievous beginnings, illustrating Twain's nuanced vision of childhood as a journey from playfulness toward moral responsibility.

C. Parallels in Contemporary Children's Literature

The duality of mischief and heroism that defines Tom Sawyer has endured across time and cultures, shaping narrative logics in both Western and Asian children's literature. Far from representing mere disobedience, youthful rebellion often functions as a literary catalyst that anticipates ethical maturity. By reframing playful defiance as a foundation for moral agency, children's texts from diverse traditions illustrate a transcultural archetype in which mischievous protagonists evolve into figures of responsibility, justice, or spiritual growth.

Western Traditions: From Rebellion to Civic Responsibility

In the Western tradition, the mischievous-to-heroic paradigm frequently manifests through narratives that transform youthful disobedience into civic duty, justice, and moral courage. Like Tom Sawyer, whose truancy and pranks anticipate his later acts of bravery, J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter consistently engages in rule-breaking, whether sneaking into forbidden areas or defying school authorities. Yet these transgressions serve not as trivial misconduct but as scaffolding for his eventual emergence as a moral leader. Harry's arc exemplifies the *Bildungsroman* trajectory, where playful defiance matures into ethical responsibility and communal protection (Nikolajeva, 2014; Nelson et al., 2024). Compared with Tom's pranks, often motivated by self-interest or playful cunning, Harry's defiance is framed more directly as resistance against oppressive systems, from school regulations to authoritarian regimes, thus emphasizing the political dimensions of rebellion.

Similarly, Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson embodies a mischievous schoolboy whose disruptions and defiance of authority foreshadow his transformation into a loyal and brave hero in mythological battles. Percy, like Tom, is impulsive and irreverent, yet his arc amplifies the link between rebellion and resilience: his mischief becomes the very resource that equips him to survive and protect others in life-threatening quests. Unlike Tom, whose heroism remains localized within his community, Percy's narrative situates rebellion within epic struggles, highlighting the mythic rather than civic scale of moral responsibility.

Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988) further diversifies the archetype by dramatizing playful defiance as intellectual and ethical empowerment. Her tricks against Miss Trunchbull, though mischievous, enact justice and emancipation, affirming children's agency in challenging oppressive authority through creativity and intelligence (Gasser et al., 2022; Kuzmičová et al., 2022). In contrast to Tom Sawyer, whose pranks oscillate between self-serving mischief and communal belonging, Matilda's defiance is unambiguously directed toward justice, reimagining rebellion as a form of moral and intellectual agency.

In sum, these Western figures illustrate both continuity and divergence with Twain's Tom Sawyer. Like Tom, they begin with acts of rebellion that blur the line between innocence and disobedience. Yet unlike Tom, whose transformation into a hero unfolds primarily within the boundaries of personal growth and small-town society, Harry, Percy, and Matilda channel mischief into broader frameworks—political resistance, mythological destiny, and intellectual justice. Collectively, these works confirm that disobedience in Western children's literature is not simply condemned but reimagined as a pathway to civic responsibility, ethical leadership, and moral growth.

Asian Traditions: Mischief as Social Critique and Cosmic Justice

In Asian traditions, the mischievous child archetype is reframed through cultural contexts that emphasize social critique, communal values, and cosmic order. Vietnamese and Chinese narratives both highlight how youthful defiance, far from being mere misbehavior, functions as a culturally sanctioned means of protecting communities, asserting cultural pride, or maintaining spiritual balance.

❖ *Vietnamese Narratives*

The Vietnamese folk hero Scholar Quynh epitomizes the trickster archetype, celebrated for his sharp wit, humor, and irreverence. Like Tom Sawyer, Quynh delights in outsmarting authority figures and disrupting social norms. However, while Tom's mischief often springs from personal amusement or youthful self-interest, Quynh's pranks carry overt political and social commentary. His targets are typically corrupt mandarins, exploitative landlords, or arrogant foreign envoys, and his tricks serve to unmask hypocrisy, challenge injustice, and restore communal dignity (Nguyen, 2001). Seen in this light, mischief is not merely tolerated but actively valorized as resistance, a legitimate means of confronting entrenched hierarchies. Whereas Tom's fence-painting scheme satirizes authority within the microcosm of childhood play, Quynh's verbal duels with mandarins dramatize a broader cultural ideal: that intelligence, humor, and rhetorical skill can subvert rigid structures of power and elevate communal pride over wealth or social rank. Curiously, Quynh's mischief does more than entertain; it functions as a social critique rarely tolerated in Western children's fiction.

This tradition of celebrating clever, mischievous children continues in the modern comic series *The Vietnamese Child Prodigy*, featuring Scholar Ti (Dao & Le, 2002). Like Tom Sawyer, Ti is mischievous yet resourceful, repeatedly tricking bullies, outsmarting rivals, or bending school rules. His mischief, however, rarely remains a matter of private gain; instead, it consistently results in creative problem-solving with communal benefit. The comparison here is telling: both Tom and Ti thrive on youthful cunning, but Tom's pranks ultimately mature into individual moral responsibility, while Ti's adventures underscore collective identity and cultural resilience. Where Tom's transformation culminates in acts of bravery that affirm his personal growth, saving Becky Thatcher or testifying for Muff Potter, Ti's narrative arc consistently reaffirms the Vietnamese ideal that rebellion and wit must contribute to community cohesion and social justice.

Quynh and Ti highlight a distinctly Vietnamese reimagining of the mischievous-to-heroic paradigm. Like Tom Sawyer, they embody the universal appeal of youthful rebellion and playful defiance. Yet unlike Tom, whose bildungsroman trajectory privileges individual moral growth, Vietnamese narratives recast mischief as a communal asset, valorizing humor and cunning as cultural strategies of survival, critique, and pride. Playful rebellion, therefore, becomes not only entertaining but also pedagogically constructive, teaching young readers that disobedience can be a socially sanctioned path to justice, dignity, and cultural resilience.

❖ *Chinese Mythology*

Chinese mythology offers parallel yet distinct reconfigurations of the mischievous-to-heroic archetype, shifting the axis of transformation from personal growth or communal critique toward cosmic order and spiritual duty. Nezha, from *The Investiture of the Gods (Fengshen Yanyi)*, begins as an impetuous child whose actions wreak havoc on both human and divine hierarchies, most famously through his conflict with the Dragon King's son. Whereas Tom Sawyer's mischief, skipping school or orchestrating playful pranks, remains localized within a small-town community, Nezha's rebellion destabilizes entire cosmic systems, dramatizing the consequences of unchecked youthful energy on a mythological scale. Crucially, Nezha's narrative arc pivots on sacrifice and rebirth: he takes his own life to protect his family and community, before being resurrected as a celestial warrior dedicated to justice and universal balance. In this way, Nezha's transformation illustrates how destructive disobedience can be sublimated into divine guardianship, elevating the mischief-to-heroism paradigm beyond civic responsibility into the realm of mythic duty and cosmic justice.

Similarly, Red Boy bursts onto the page in fire and fury, a child whose defiance shakes both mortals and immortals before being subdued by Guanyin. Initially depicted as arrogant, violent, and defiant toward divine authority, Red Boy's mastery of fire and refusal to submit mirror Tom Sawyer's resistance to adult control, but with far greater destructive potential. Unlike Tom, whose pranks expose social hypocrisy or test the boundaries of local authority, Red Boy's mischief threatens spiritual and cosmic hierarchies. His eventual defeat by Sun Wukong and conversion under Guanyin's guidance recasts his aggression as a stage of moral testing, redirecting his unruly energy into religious devotion and service. This trajectory reflects Confucian and Buddhist ideals—discipline, filial piety, and spiritual redemption—underscoring that youthful rebellion, while disruptive, can be reshaped into piety and moral responsibility.

Placed alongside Tom Sawyer, Nezha and Red Boy both demonstrate the universal narrative appeal of mischievous children who test boundaries. Yet the divergences are striking: Tom's rebellion matures into civic responsibility and personal morality, while Nezha's and Red Boy's arcs situate youthful defiance within frameworks of cosmic order and spiritual transformation. These contrasts highlight how the mischievous-to-heroic archetype is culturally elastic: in the Anglo-American West, mischief evolves into ethical individuality; in Chinese mythology, it is sublimated into divine guardianship and spiritual transcendence.

When set against Tom Sawyer, these Vietnamese and Chinese figures underscore the cultural elasticity of the mischievous-to-heroic paradigm. Whereas Western texts often frame rebellion as a precursor to civic responsibility and individual ethical agency, Vietnamese narratives cast mischief as a socially sanctioned critique of power and a reinforcement of communal identity. Chinese mythology elevates the same archetype to a cosmic register, where youthful rebellion is absorbed into frameworks of sacrifice, discipline, and spiritual justice. Together, these traditions reveal that while the transformation from mischief to heroism is a universal motif, its narrative outcomes differ according to cultural value systems: communal pride in Vietnam, cosmic order in China, and civic duty in the Anglo-American West. Together, these Vietnamese and Chinese narratives reveal how Asian traditions reimagine mischievousness not merely as youthful disobedience but as a culturally sanctioned means of critiquing authority, preserving communal identity, and restoring cosmic harmony.

❖ *Comparative Synthesis: Toward a Transcultural Archetype*

When examined side by side, Western and Asian traditions reveal both continuities and divergences in the construction of the mischievous-to-heroic paradigm. Across cultures, childhood mischief is consistently portrayed as more than mere comic relief; it becomes a narrative testing ground through which ethical development and personal transformation are explored. The ways in which mischief is framed, however, vary significantly depending on cultural context, resulting in different narrative outcomes.

In Anglo-American literature, the trajectory of mischief typically culminates in civic responsibility and individual moral courage. Characters such as Tom Sawyer, Harry Potter, and Percy Jackson embody the Bildungsroman model, in which youthful disobedience and playful defiance evolve into the capacity for bravery, leadership, and ethical

accountability. Mischief in this context is re-coded as ingenuity and resilience, preparing the protagonist for participation in broader social and civic spheres.

Vietnamese narratives, by contrast, frame mischief as a culturally sanctioned form of social critique and communal pride. Figures such as Scholar Quynh and Scholar Ti deploy humor, wit, and playful defiance not only to challenge authority but also to protect communal values and affirm collective identity. Here, the mischievous child becomes a spokesperson for social justice and cultural continuity, suggesting that rebellion is not merely tolerated but celebrated when it exposes hypocrisy and reinforces the resilience of the community.

Chinese mythology provides yet another variation, where mischief is absorbed into frameworks of cosmic order and spiritual transformation. Nezha's rebellion escalates to a cosmic scale before being reoriented toward loyalty, sacrifice, and justice through self-renewal. Similarly, Red Boy's mischievous aggression is redirected into piety under Guanyin's guidance, exemplifying the integration of unruly energy into Confucian and Buddhist ideals of filial duty and spiritual devotion. In these cases, the mischievous child becomes a figure who safeguards cosmic balance and embodies spiritual transcendence.

Considered as a whole, these cultural trajectories suggest that the mischievous-to-heroism paradigm constitutes a genuinely transcultural narrative archetype. Twain's Tom Sawyer, while firmly rooted in nineteenth-century American boyhood, can be situated within a broader global continuum of child protagonists whose playful disobedience matures into moral agency, social critique, or spiritual growth. By placing Anglo-American, Vietnamese, and Chinese traditions into dialogue, the analysis highlights the universality of this archetype while also emphasizing the distinct cultural frameworks that shape its diverse manifestations. Such comparative insights demonstrate not only the adaptability of Twain's model across traditions but also the enduring vitality of mischievous child figures in world literature.

V. DISCUSSION

The analysis of Tom Sawyer's duality as both mischievous and heroic underscores how children's literature mediates between entertainment and moral instruction across cultures. Twain's characterization exemplifies the paradox of childhood: a stage marked simultaneously by playful rebellion and by preparation for moral and civic responsibilities. From a narratological perspective, Tom's actions—whether tricking his peers into whitewashing a fence or risking his life to save Becky Thatcher—function as semiotic cues that invite readers to interpret childhood as a transformative journey (Jannidis, 2013; Ribó, 2019). Such layered narrative strategies highlight what Jahn (2005) identifies as the role of irony, symbolism, and perspective in shaping character identity.

Situating Twain's work within the wider tradition of children's literature reveals both continuities and shifts in the function of mischievous protagonists. As Grenby (2008) notes, the genre has historically sought to balance pleasure with instruction, and Tom Sawyer embodies this enduring tension. Empirical studies confirm that young readers still value stories that combine entertainment with moral and social lessons (Bayraktar, 2021). In this respect, Twain's novel not only reflects nineteenth-century cultural expectations of childhood but also anticipates the ongoing pedagogical role of children's literature, aligning with what Nelson et al. (2024) describe as the genre's negotiation between imagination and societal norms.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that Twain's archetype resonates beyond Anglo-American contexts. In Vietnamese narratives such as *Scholar Quynh* and *The Vietnamese Child Prodigy Comics*, mischief becomes a vehicle of social critique and cultural pride, where humor and defiance expose hypocrisy and affirm communal identity (Nguyen, 2001; Dao & Le, 2002). In Chinese mythology, figures such as Nezha and Red Boy illustrate how rebellion is reconfigured into cosmic justice or spiritual devotion, reflecting Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist frameworks of moral growth (Wu, 1993; Xu, 1993). These parallels highlight that mischievousness, far from being culturally marginal, is widely accepted as a stage of moral testing that leads to responsibility, whether civic, communal, or cosmic.

Cognitive and reader-response perspectives further enrich this analysis. Nikolajeva (2014) argues that children's literature fosters moral reasoning and perspective-taking, while recent studies demonstrate that readers engage dialogically with mischievous protagonists, rehearsing complex social roles through imaginative play (Kuzmičová et al., 2022). Recent research also stresses the importance of authentic representation, with Hughes and Talley's (2025) study showing how portrayals of disability in children's literature often remain partial or stereotypical, underscoring the need for more inclusive characterizations. Tom Sawyer's transformation from trickster to reluctant hero thus functions as a prototype through which readers across cultures may negotiate questions of identity, morality, and belonging. Comparative evidence from Vietnam and China underscores the universality of this function, though mediated by local traditions and value systems.

At the same time, cultural and spatial contexts significantly influence how mischief is read and reinterpreted. As Mackey (2022) observes, reading environments, whether communal, digital, or pedagogical, shape interpretive practices. Within Twain's novel, the communal spaces of school, cave, and town square not only stage Tom's adventures but also model how children interact with collective norms and boundaries. Similarly, the courtrooms, imperial palaces, and mythological battlefields of Asian texts frame mischief as a force that either destabilizes or restores order. These parallels confirm that childhood rebellion consistently functions as a cultural lens through which societies explore the boundaries of freedom, discipline, and moral growth.

Considered as a whole, these perspectives highlight *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as more than a nostalgic tale of American boyhood. It represents a foundational text within a global continuum of mischievous child figures, whose transformations into heroes illuminate shared human concerns about growth, justice, and responsibility. Its dual construction of mischief and heroism, far from being contradictory, emerges as a universal narrative strategy that allows literature to balance delight with instruction. By re-situating Tom Sawyer alongside both Western and Asian traditions, this study not only reaffirms the novel's canonical status but also expands its relevance as part of a transcultural archetype of the rebellious child turned hero.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* constructs its protagonist through a duality of mischief and heroism, a narrative strategy that continues to inform children's literature across cultures. Tom's playful disobedience, whether through pranks, truancy, or rule-breaking, functions as a prelude to ethical maturity, ultimately reshaped into acts of courage, loyalty, and responsibility. By tracing these dynamics across Anglo-American, Vietnamese, and Chinese traditions, the analysis establishes the "mischief-to-heroism" paradigm as a transcultural archetype, illustrating how child protagonists negotiate authority, social norms, and moral growth in diverse cultural settings.

The findings contribute to literary scholarship by broadening the interpretive scope of Twain's novel. Rather than a uniquely American icon of boyhood, Tom Sawyer emerges as part of a global continuum of mischievous children whose rebellion is narratively recoded into civic responsibility, social critique, or spiritual transformation. This comparative framework enriches literary criticism by highlighting how cultural traditions shape universal archetypes, while also offering pedagogical insights: children's literature can be taught not merely as entertainment but as a cross-cultural medium through which young readers explore justice, resilience, and identity formation. For comparative literature and education, such insights emphasize the value of including both Western classics and Asian narratives in curricula to foster intercultural awareness.

The scope of this study is necessarily limited. Its primary focus has been on Anglo-American, Vietnamese, and Chinese traditions, leaving aside other rich narrative traditions in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East where mischievous child figures also play formative roles. In addition, the study has emphasized textual analysis, without incorporating empirical reception studies that could reveal how contemporary readers across different cultures interpret these characters.

Future research might expand this comparative lens by examining additional cultural traditions, thereby testing the universality of the "mischief-to-heroism" paradigm on a broader global scale. Empirical studies with child readers could further illuminate how these archetypes are received in classroom and popular contexts, especially in multicultural or bilingual settings. Another promising direction would be to explore how digital adaptations, such as animated films, webcomics, or video games, reinterpret mischievous child figures for twenty-first-century audiences. By pursuing these avenues, scholarship can more fully capture the evolving vitality of the rebellious child archetype in world literature.

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